

Committee on Metals in the Environment, and U.S. Borax. Among the 145 conference attendees were representatives of FDA, the Canadian government, various state and local water utilities, environmental agencies, energy utilities, and scientists from the United States, Taiwan, Mexico, Chile, Canada, Australia, and Europe.

## A Win for Wetlands

On August 24, an interagency working group composed of nine federal agencies, including EPA, the Department of Agriculture, and the Army Corps of Engineers, announced a new wetlands initiative touted as fair, comprehensive, and ending years of gridlock.

"The new agreement is a significant advance in protecting American wetlands, which are currently being lost at a rate of nearly 300,000 acres per year," said EPA Administrator Carol Browner. "The agreement is fair to landowners at the same time that it protects our water quality and wildlife."

The interagency working group was formed in response to a request from seven U.S. senators that the White House take the lead in resolving the contentious wetlands issues that have been the heart of controversy for years. The interagency group has been meeting since June, hearing farmers, environmentalists, developers, and scientists.

"This wetlands policy is meaningful reform—for the environment and for the farmers and ranchers of America," said Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy. "It is a fair and flexible policy that simplifies the process of identifying wetlands and provides farmers a simpler method for identi-

fying federal requirements for wetland conservation."

The new wetlands initiative includes more than 40 changes to current policy. Some parts of the plan will take effect over the next several months; other parts take the form of legislative recommendations for Congress as part of the reauthorization of the Clean Water Act, which will be addressed this fall. Specifics of the wetlands plan are:

- Close a loophole that allowed destructive activities such as draining to go unregulated,
- Establish a new appeals process so that farmers and landowners can seek review of permit decisions without going to court,
- Impose deadlines on permit decisions,
- Establish the Soil Conservation Service of the Department of Agriculture as the lead agency for wetland determinations on agricultural lands,
- Withdraw a proposed rule that would have left Alaskan wetlands unprotected,
- Increase emphasis on state, tribal, and local government roles, as well as voluntary wetlands protection programs with landowners.

The new initiative has been well received thus far. Gerald Digeress, president of the National Association of Conservation Districts and a dairy farmer, said, "After years of confusion and conflict regarding wetlands protection and regulation, American's conservation districts welcome what appears to be a fair, flexible, and technically feasible approach that recognizes the environmental, economic, and social benefits of these valuable resources."

## Brain Food

Children are often told how important it is to eat their spinach and broccoli in order to get their vitamins. For pregnant women and women of childbearing age, the Food and Drug Administration will soon take that advice a step further when it begins fortifying the food supply with folic acid, a B-vitamin found in spinach, broccoli, and other foods, which could cut the rate of neural tube birth defects by 70% and significantly decrease the incidence of other birth defects.

"This is the most important medical finding of the 20th century," said Godfrey Oakley, director of the birth defects division at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, speaking of folic acid's role in preventing birth defects. "It's like the Salk vaccine—its that magnitude of importance," said Oakley.

The decision to fortify products including enriched flours, rice, and cornmeal was made in response to evidence showing that even women with well-balanced diets are not getting enough folic acid, which is broken down at an increased rate during pregnancy. Neural tube disorders, including spina bifida and anencephaly, occur 20–24 days after conception when tissues forming the neural tube (which gives rise to the brain and spinal cord) fail to close. Since many women may not even be aware of the pregnancy at this point, it is vital that they receive folic acid even before becoming pregnant. Folic acid has no effect after the defects have occurred.

The push for fortification of food with folic acid has been slowed somewhat by concerns that it can make detection of pernicious anemia, a rare blood disorder which can cause nerve and brain damage, more difficult. Scientists at CDC have responded that these concerns can be alleviated by controlling the amounts given.

Not only does folic acid prevent neural tube disorders, it may also protect against potential harmful side effects to children from *in utero* exposure to methanol. Folic acid is critical in the detoxification of methanol, which is currently being considered by government and industry as an alternative fuel. In cases of folic acid deficiency, formate, a metabolite of methanol, accumulates in the blood, creating a pH imbalance which can cause toxicity [see Forum, EHP 101(2)].

## Milwaukee's Water Woes

Anyone who lives in metropolitan Milwaukee knows what contaminated water can do to a community. What was probably one of the world's most massive documented outbreaks of waterborne illness occurred this spring when cryptosporidia,



**Wetlands drying up.** A new federal initiative would stem the current loss of nearly 300,000 acres per year.